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ABSTRACT

Professional development center programs present the opportunity for both practitioners and researchers to gain valuable insights into the teaching profession and the mental lives of teachers. Evaluation of these programs informs educational researchers and is responsive to the needs and expectations of funding agencies. It would be useful to conduct program evaluations in the areas of decision making, program and participant characteristics, and program effectiveness. (Author/CJ)

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Occasional Paper No. 32

HOW CAN EVALUATION OF STAFF DEVELOPMENT CENTERS BE MADE USEFUL TO RESEARCHERS?

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Institute for Research on Teaching

Teachers' thoughts and decisions are the focus of studies currently under way at Michigan State University's Institute for Research on Teaching (IRT). The IRT was founded in April 1976 with a $3.6 million grant from the National Institute of Education. That grant has since been renewed, extending IRT's work through September 1981. Funding is also received from other agencies and foundations. The Institute has major projects investigating teacher decision-making, including studies of reading diagnosis and remediation, classroom management strategies, instruction in the areas of language arts, reading, and mathematics, teacher education, teacher planning, effects of external pressures on teachers' decisions, socio-cultural factors, and teachers' perceptions of student affect. Researchers from many different disciplines cooperate in IRT research. In addition, public school teachers work at IRT as half-time collaborators in research, helping to design and plan studies, collect data, and analyze results. The Institute publishes research reports, conference proceedings, occasional papers, and a free quarterly newsletter for practitioners. For more information or to be placed on the IRT mailing list please write to : The IRT Editor, 252 Erickson, MSU, East Lansing, Michigan 48824.

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Abstract

The proliferation of staff development centers will surely be followed by a similar proliferation of center evaluations. While the primary clients for those evaluations will be the funding agencies and center staff, researchers stand to gain valuable new information from such evaluations. This paper presumes that the activities that surround center programs represent rich sources of valuable data for researchers interested in the mental life of teachers. The paper suggests several strategic questions that would inform both the evaluation clients and researchers. The suggested questions look at decision making, program-participant characteristics, effective program characteristics, and the physical structures of the staff development centers.

HOW CAN EVALUATION OF STAFF DEVELOPMENT CENTERS BE MADE USEFUL TO RESEARCHERS?[1]

Lawrence W. Lezotte[2]

The remarks presented in this paper are predicated on two assumptions: (1) that staff development centers will be evaluated, and (2) that the clients to be served by the evaluations will be the centers' funding agencies. The first assumption derives from the fact that most staff development centers receive some, if not all, of their financial support from public sources. As a result, some level of accountability will be tied to those resources. This pattern of evaluating new or special-purpose programs supported by public monies is well established and will, in all likelihood, be applied to these programs as well. The second assumption follows from the pattern and purposes of program evaluations generally. Most textbooks on program evaluation site the client orientation of evaluations as one of the factors that distinguish program evaluation from other forms of disciplined inquiry.

I have no problem with these assumptions or their implications because I feel this is as it should be. I believe that the question of who else, beyond the immediate funding agency, may benefit from a professional development center evaluation remains an important question, but I will restrict my remarks here to the question of whether staff development center evaluations and the data contained in them can be useful to researchers.

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[1]Paper presented as a symposium at the American Educational Research Association Conference, Boston, 1980.

[2]Lawrence W. Lezotte is associate director of the IRT and coordinator of the IRT Communication/Dissemination Unit.

I agree with most program evaluation scholars who say that even though program evaluations are typically conducted for a single client, they can, in fact, be useful to other client groups as well. I am firmly convinced that the data collected for the purpose of evaluating staff development centers can be useful to social behavioral researchers generally and those interested in research on teaching specifically. In the following paragraphs, I will attempt to describe some of the types of data that would be valuable to my colleagues and I at the Institute for Research on Teaching (IRT) at Michigan State University. I must hasten to add that not all data relevant to the evaluation clients would be valuable to those interested in research on teaching, nor would all research-on-teaching scholars be as interested as we at the Institute would be in some of the data likely to be included in professional development center evaluations.

In order to better understand my suggestions, it would be helpful to know a little about the IRT's orientation to research on teaching. The Institutes' orientation is based on the assumption that much more needs to be known about the mental life of teachers than is currently known. While we at the Institute recognize that teacher behavior is an important factor in teaching and learner outcomes, we also feel that how teachers behave and what they do is directed in no small measure by what they think, believe, feel, and perceive. The relationship between teacher thought and action is the critical issue and central focus of all our inquiries.

Using the IRT's conceptual framework, the question addressed in this paper becomes, "What data gathered pursuant to the evaluation of staff development centers may also serve to inform research on teaching about the mental life of teachers and the relationship between teacher thought and action?" Several interesting possibilities come to mind.

Most professional development centers have a defined constituency (e.g., all teachers in a given school district). The planning process that accompanies a professional development center is likely to include some sort of needs assessment in which the members of the constituency are given the opportunity to indicate the needs, problems, or concerns that are of most relevance to them in their work. Research on teaching can benefit from a careful analysis of such needs assessment results. Such an analysis would inform those interested in research on teaching about the most pressing problems perceived by these professional educators.

As a member of the research on teaching community, I would find it extremely useful to know, for example, whether perceived needs tend to be context specific or general. Some of the contextual factors that may be important are the type of school in which the respondent is functioning (rural, urban, suburban), the subject matter area (math, reading, science, and so on), and the age and grade level of the students with which the respondent is associated (early elementary, middle school, high school). The analysis of the needs assessment data, according to some of these contextual factors, would provide researchers with a rich description of one aspect of the mental life of teachers.

A second type of data likely to be available as part of professional development center operations has to do with the decision-making processes of the center's governance group. In all probability, the identified needs of the constituency will substantially exceed the resources available to respond to those needs. Therefore, some individual or group will be faced with the difficult task of deciding what needs will be responded to in the short run, and selecting programs and activities that, in their judgment, will best respond to those needs receiving priority attention.

As a researcher interesced in teacher decision making, I would find it most informative to know how such decisions are made. Presumably, any time some individual or group chooses one option over another they have a reason or a set of beliefs that serve to guide those choices. If I were able to get some insight into those beliefs and reasons, I would be more informed about another aspect of teachers' lives. Specifically, I would know more about their personal philosophy of education, their beliefs about what is important to them, and how they think their needs are best responded to by planned programs.

As the planned programs of a staff development center are identified and made available, some members of the constituency will choose to participate and others will not. As a researcher interested in the mental life of teachers, I would find it useful to know why those who did participate did so, and why those who did not participate chose not to.

Based on the advertisement that describes a forthcoming program, for example, individuals make judgments about the utility of that program for them. I would find it informative to know why people seeing the same announcement came to different conclusions about the program. Did those who chose not to participate do so because of logistical concerns (e.g., date, time, place, format) or because of something they saw in the program announcement about the program's content?

As programs are implemented, those who participate will differ in their evaluation of the experience. I would find it useful in understanding how teachers think about professional growth and development if I were able to determine why some judged an experience valuable and others did not. Most of the evaluations conducted around planned programs usually do not address the matter of why individuals reacted as they did--good or bad. I would suggest that such evaluations should attempt to get

beneath the surface assessments. Such information would be helpful to all groups interested in staff development centers, not just those interested in research on teaching or the mental life of teachers.

It would seem reasonable to assume that sooner or later the evaluation of professional development centers would turn to the matter of impact on teachers, their teaching behaviors, and ultimately the students with whom teachers interact. If and when the evaluations attempt to follow teachers back to their schools and classrooms and look for observable consequences on classroom life, a whole host of unexplored questions would be of interest to researchers as well as other client groups. If center programs are to be judged valuable and worthwhile, members of the constituency must experience sustained professional development from them.

As a researcher, I would be interested in knowing which programs and activities had what enduring effects on which participants and with what consequences to those participants and their students. It would seem that some insights to these questions would truly inform the research community, and, perhaps as importantly, the program decision makers as well. I am assuming that those individuals responsible for managing and directing the professional development centers want to do what is beneficial for their constituency and the students they serve. If evaluations are going to help them achieve their goals, the evaluators will need to include data collection procedures to answer the questions outlined above as well as many other questions that look to impact.

Up to this point, I have suggested what data gathered around planned programs would be informative to researchers. Most professional development centers will probably have educational resources, materials, and a physical place for people to gather which goes beyond normal programs (e.g., workshop sessions) as such. This aspect of professional development center

activities, while less structured and focused, is no less rich with respect to what it may communicate to researchers interested in understanding more about the mental life of teachers.

One of the obvious data sources researchers would find informative is a description of the center's physical arrangement. Why did the decision-makers choose to place the center where they did? What assumptions or beliefs guided the decisions regarding the actual arrangement of the physical setting? How were decisions made about which books, journals, magazines, and the like were to be purchased for the center reading area? A careful and detailed description of the professional development center will provide insights about the decision-makers concept of effective settings for professional growth and development.

Researchers would also be interested in knowing about those who come to the center. For example, what expectations do these individuals bring with them? What do these individuals do while they are in attendance? Researchers would also be interested in the nature of interpersonal interactions that come to characterize the center. They would find it helpful to know what issues and topics teachers talk about with their colleagues.

Individual center users will likely return to their work places with a concept of the center, what's there, and how they can benefit from it. Researchers would be interested in knowing how teachers describe the center to their colleagues. Subsequently, researchers would be interested in knowing whether center users are effective in raising the level of interest in the center among their teacher colleagues.

Many educational researchers are interested in the problems of individual and institutional change. Such researchers would be interested in knowing whether center-sponsored programs and activities purposely designed for the staff of a single school site were more or less

effective in creating enduring change in individual staff members or the instructional staff. These questions would have a significant impact on how scarce professional development resources are, or ought to be, programmatically allocated.

Another area that may be included in professional development center evaluations has to do with the assessments made of the center by those not directly served by or involved with it. For example, how do community residents assess the purpose and effectiveness of the center? Does the Board of Education have an understanding of the center? Do students, especially secondary students who may be exploring possible careers in education, see the center as a place where career information might be found?

Summary

Throughout this paper, I have described a variety of types of data that educational researchers generally, and those interested in research on teaching specifically, would find useful and informative. I have tried to give examples of data that might realistically be incorporated in an evaluation of a professional development center. I have tried to keep in mind that the primary client for such evaluations is the funding source for the center itself. In my judgment, much of the data I have suggested would be of interest to researchers would also be useful to the primary clients as they make evaluative decisions about the program in the present and the future.

The Institute for Research on Teaching is attempting to respond to the fact that we know very little about the mental life of teachers, how they conceive of their role, their perceptions of needs and problems, and so on. The professional development centers program represents a unique

opportunity to gain valuable insights into the teaching profession and the mental lives of teachers. Evaluation reports of professional development centers and the data contained in them represent a unique source of valuable information that can serve to inform the field of research on teaching and at the same time be responsive to the needs and expectations of funding agencies.